

Peak performance

Hunting blue grouse in Colorado's unforgiving mountains requires a little bit of luck along with a whole lot of pluck, says **Melissa Volpi**

"This country could kill you," says Marc Patoile as we set off up through the sagebrush towards the mountain's peak. "It always reminds me of the cowboy gunslingers' saying: 'It's better to be carried by six than judged by 12.'" True perhaps, but a bit pessimistic for the start of a hunting expedition.

Colorado is the eighth largest state in the US: at 280 miles long by 380 miles wide, it's bigger than my native Scotland. This hunting ground alone, located in Pitkin County, measures 2.3million acres. Today we are after blue grouse, aided by Marc's Brittany spaniels, Émile and Rémy.

It's not just the savage expanse of this landscape that's so daunting; it's also the 79°F heat, the thin air and the great claw-scars on the aspen trees, a reminder that black bears roam these hillsides.

I check my safety gear again. As well as a Spanish 20-bore side-by-side and plenty of cartridges, I've got shatterproof sunglasses, an emergency whistle round my neck, a water pouch stuffed into my waistcoat pocket, and thorn-proof chaps in order to protect my jeans and legs from the sagebrush and

yuccas. All I need now is a quarter-horse and a Colt pistol and I could join Hailee Steinfeld and Jeff Bridges in the remake of *True Grit*.

An English accent snaps me from my Western daydream. Two more hunters have joined us: Marc's friend James Wall and sporting artist Kent Lemon. They've been out since 6.30am, and they've already shot their bag limit of three grouse each.

It's beginning to dawn on me that, when it comes to blue grouse shooting, the early bird catches the worm. This evening, I promise myself, I will not be persuaded to stay up until 3.30am...

It's still only 10.30am, so Marc and I brave the rising heat and head further up the mountain to a rasping chorus of grasshoppers. I decide not to ask him how you tell the difference between a grasshopper and a rattlesnake.

I lag farther behind as the ground steepens, and eventually I lose sight of Marc altogether. By the time I crest the ridge, at 7,200ft, I am already picturing the search party finding my ►

▼ (l-r) Hunters James Wall and Marc Patoile set off towards the mountain's peak; this hunting ground measures 2.3million acres



unfired 20-bore beside a pile of sun-bleached bones. To my relief, I hear two quick shots from just over the ridge.

"A double," Marc shouts happily. "Come and help me find them." This is easier said than done. The dogs are having trouble scenting in the heat. The grass reaches to my shoulders, hiding clumps of sagebrush. It's difficult to move, never mind spot the perfectly camouflaged, mottled brown feathers of the dead birds.

The dogs find one quickly, but it's nearly half an hour before we locate the second and set off back down the ridgeline. I still haven't fired my gun. "Follow Émile," Marc says. "He'll find you some birds."

It's a two-hour drive to what Paul assures me is 'the best hunting location in the White River National Forest'

Morning becomes lunchtime, and Émile begins to tire. I feel like I'm all out of luck today. Then there's a shot to my left. It's Marc. Again. Émile and I look at each other in astonishment. I've been out here for hours. Eight grouse have been shot and I've yet to see one alive.

"We'll find more tomorrow," Marc tells me encouragingly, stuffing the bird into his rucksack. "You have to stay closer to the dogs."

It's time to head back. Marc's friend Paul and his girlfriend, Michelle, are joining us this evening for dinner.



▲ Hunters are asked to deposit a wing from each grouse shot inside this container, so the Wildlife Division is able to keep a check on the harvest

Back at the condo, Marc plucks his three grouse while I boil some stock and start preparing the wild mushroom risotto. Marc cuts the dark meat into chunks, dips them in flour, egg wash and Parmesan-infused breadcrumbs, then places them carefully in a pan of sizzling hot oil. I add a finishing swirl of cream to the risotto. Just then, there is a knock at the door. Perfect timing.

The grouse tastes heavily of pine needles. We swap a few hunting stories over dinner before turning in early, ready for our 5.30am start.

Michelle is up first. By the time we are all kitted out in hunting gear, she has already made French toast. The combination of egg, butter and sugar is just what I need to wake me up at this ungodly hour.

Marc Patoile with Rémy, his spaniel, and his first blue grouse of the season



▲ Marc Patoile hunts blue grouse in the mountain's vast hunting ground; during the team's hunt, temperatures reached up to a sweltering 79°F

Émile and Rémy are excited to see us and bound over towards Marc. Bella, Paul's Bracco Italiano, looks haughtily at the rowdy Brittany spaniels, and strides serenely towards the massive pickup. Bella is five years old and a beautiful orange roan colour. She watches Paul longingly, waiting for the next command.

It's a two-hour drive to what Paul assures me is "the best hunting location in the White River National Forest". Today we are after sharp-tailed grouse and the limit for these is two per day. We pass large green and white signs that read: *Attention Hunters, stay within posted boundaries. Report all violations to the Routt County Sheriff.* Marc explains that they hunt mostly public lands here in Colorado, and like to keep their favourite spots secret.

Further on there's another sign: *Attention Grouse Hunters, please deposit one wing from each grouse harvested in the above container.* "It's so the Wildlife Division can keep a check on harvests," Paul explains to me.

We stop to see how many wings are in the container. Only two. That's not a good sign. The season has been open several days and this is a huge expanse of forest, serviced by this one road with just one container. It's been the hottest August on record. "When it's hot," Paul explains, "the grouse head higher to find food."

Things don't look good. But we've only been walking for 10 minutes when Marc fires twice. He has shot a double, so his day is over almost before it's begun.

Paul and I head up into the hills. It's a joy to watch Bella work. Her trot is fast and long. A French ►

When finally caught, the blue grouse appears tiny against the vast Colorado landscape





Paw marks on the Aspen trees are a stark reminder that black bears roam the hillsides

▲ Paul's Bracco Italiano, Bella, with the harvested grouse. Braccos are trained to stay in the trot rather than gallop, as most other pointers do
 ► Paul bags up the harvested blue grouse. This being Colorado's hottest August on record, the birds had eluded hunters a lot more than usual

◀ trotting horse can trot at the speed of a gallop and Bella looks like she could do the same. "They train Braccos to stay in the trot," Paul says, "rather than galloping along as most other pointers do."

We struggle up and down the steep inclines, passing a herd of sheep watched over by a Pyrenean mountain dog.

Keeping up with the dogs through large clumps of sagebrush requires an elegant high-stepping action, not unlike a Hackney horse. It's hard work. Back in Scotland, I prepared for this trip with 10-mile hikes, four times a week — but the combination of heat and hills is making me feel unwell. Marc's words play in my head: "This country could kill you..."

Paul hears me struggling for breath and decides to call it a day. Another blank one for me. That night I sleep deeper than I ever have, and don't wake properly until we arrive at the old deer hunters' camp next morning.

We set off along the track towards a sharp turning. "That's Black Bear Bend," says Paul. "It's always plentiful with either bears or grouse. Keep your fingers crossed it's grouse today."

My apprehension must be obvious. "Don't worry," adds Marc. "Black bears don't kill you like grizzlies, they just maul you. The problem here is no mobile phone reception, so just don't get lost," he grins.

I let Paul and Marc take the lead and watch them disappear around the bend. Silence: is that a good sign or not? I'm about to dash round the corner to see what's happening, when I hear four shots. Please let it be grouse...

The look on Paul's face tells me all I need to know. "Plenty of grouse here, Melissa," he says jubilantly. "We've got our two each, let's find some for you now."

We head downhill towards a small patch of trees — and suddenly, there it is. I've walked three days for this moment and it's almost an anticlimax. Perched on a fallen aspen 30 yards in front of me, the grouse looks minuscule in this landscape. It's like a small, insipid version of Scotland's native red grouse.



I must shoot this grouse; it's my last chance. If I fail, it's over and I fly back to Scotland without a worthy tale to tell. I stuff two cartridges into the breech, snap the barrels shut, and press the stock gently into my shoulder.

Time stands still. Each step towards the grouse seems to take an hour. Bella comes to my rescue. She has scented the grouse and creeps towards the tree. She stops, raises her nose, and looks at Paul, waiting for the command.

"OK Bella," he whispers, and she's off. The grouse explodes into flight and there's no time to think — I shoot. My aim is good, and several pellets penetrate the area between the right wing and the breast. The grouse crashes to the ground and Bella is upon it.

"Good shot, Melissa," Paul grins. "What a relief!" Relief indeed; first that this country didn't kill me after all, and second that I got my grouse — eventually.

Never have I worked so hard for my quarry as I did for that grouse. But never did a grouse taste so sweet, even without the creamy mushroom risotto accompaniment. ■

All grouse hunters have to purchase a licence from the Colorado Division of Wildlife, costing \$56 for non-residents plus a \$10 habitat stamp. You can purchase the licence online at: <https://www1.co.wildlifelicence.com/start.php>.